BOOKS & ARTS

Big problems, big decisions

Sustainable solutions to worldwide crises such as overpopulation and climate change need regulating by global bodies, but whose views should these organizations represent?

Supranational organizations are necessary to monitor the welfare of our planet. They alert us to impending crises, develop policies to avert dangers and induce governments to respond. But it is easy to lose sight of who these organizations represent.

Two books — *Fatal Misconception* by historian Matthew Connelly and *Common Wealth* by economist Jeffrey Sachs — highlight the importance of knowing who speaks for whom. Connelly describes how the international family-planning movement responded to concerns of an imminent population explosion. Sachs assesses our stewardship of this crowded planet and suggests how we should conduct its affairs.

In *Fatal Misconception*, Connelly begins his story in the early 1950s, when public-health advances reduced mortality among the impoverished populations of newly independent nations. Demographers, birth-control activists and eugenicists began to worry that population growth might outstrip the global food supply. Militating against limits to population growth were the Vatican and a US law (the Comstock Act of 1873) that prohibited birth control by married couples and the sale of contraceptive devices. In 1952, the Vatican secured a veto preventing any involvement of the fledgling World Health Organization in population matters. Nonetheless, a worldwide movement emerged that was initially dedicated narrowly to population control, but which eventually came to see questions of fertility as part of the developmental progress of nations.

Two international conferences, held four decades apart, encapsulate this change. The first was convened by US philanthropist John D. Rockefeller III in 1952 at the still-segregated Williamsburg Inn in Virginia. The delegates (mostly white men) created two organizations dedicated to the revolutionary idea of securing a global reduction in population growth: the Population Council and the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF). To be credible, the organizations sought international involvement. A window of opportunity materialized

Family matters: a clinic doctor advises women on family planning and contraception in India.

in 1952 when Indian president Jawaharlal Nehru announced the world's first national population policy for India.

The second meeting, on population and development, was sponsored by the United Nations and held in Cairo in 1994. The delegates endorsed a radical new policy asserting the right of women to control their own fertility, together with improvements in maternal health and female literacy, as the best route to stabilizing the population. Opposition was slight, and came from an alliance of conservative Muslim and Catholic states.

The mass birth-control campaigns of the 1950s were improvised affairs that used inadequately tested devices and procedures. Connelly leads us adroitly through extraordinary and complex incidents, particularly the interventions in India. The first Indian family-planning campaign at Khanna, Punjab, was initiated by a team from Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and failed disastrously; subjects agreed to participate but would not use the contraceptives. Threatened by famine, India was blackmailed by US president

Lyndon B. Johnson's administration into accelerating its population programme by the promise of food aid. In an atmosphere bordering on panic, two coercive family-planning campaigns in India spawned a legacy of bitterness towards experts and politicians. Meanwhile, fears of communism fuelled clandestine support from the US government for the IPPF's worldwide birth-control campaigns, conveniently out of sight of Congress. India later expelled the family-planning consultants in exasperation over US partiality for Pakistan. Nevertheless, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), working indirectly through a United Nations agency, inundated the developing world with contraceptive devices. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan's administration withdrew US support for UN population policy.

By 1990, the average family size had fallen from six or more children to around three almost everywhere apart from sub-Saharan Africa. Connelly believes that intense birth-control campaigns contributed little to this decline (except in China). Fertility was already falling before the campaigns started, owing to social changes, but was probably assisted by the broad availability of contraceptives, including those distributed through USAID.

Connelly suggests that the "fatal misconception" of the population movement was its

Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population

by Matthew Connelly

Harvard University Press: 2008. 544 pp. \$35.00, £22.95

Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet

by Jeffrey D. Sachs

Penguin/Allen Lane: 2008. 400 pp. \$27.95, £22

conviction that it knew the best interests of poor agrarian people. They needed large families in case some of their children died prematurely to ensure provision of care in old age and a labour force.

Continuing the theme of global stewardship, Sachs' book *Common Wealth* is a manifesto for securing a bright future for Earth. A key plank in Sachs' platform is the stabilization of world population to minimize the tension between industrialized and developing nations. The profligacy of industrialized life is the most severe threat to the environment, and can only get worse as China and India add to the burden. Some of the most fragile habitats on Earth are being degraded rapidly by population pressure.

Just as everyone in democratic societies has a stake in their communal arrangements, Sachs argues that a global society must evolve to meet the ecological, demographic and economic challenges we face together. Reaching a shared prosperity requires the sustainable use of energy, land and resources, stabilization of population at around eight billion by 2050 and the elimination of extreme poverty by 2025. Arguing that solutions are possible, Sachs points to our success in negotiating other potential subsistence crises through scientific discovery. New technologies and reduced exploitation of natural resources may suffice to avert future catastrophes.

Sachs presents sobering statistics: we use 45% of Earth's photosynthetic potential; 60% of the run-off water and, of all the

atmospheric nitrogen fixed, 55% is obtained through the Haber–Bosch chemical process. Fertilizers from this process underpinned production of 80% of cereals consumed in the twentieth century; without it, the world's population would be only one-quarter of what it is at present. During the past 50 years, carbon dioxide levels have increased by 25% and may double by 2050. If so, the global temperature is predicted to rise by 3 °C, drastically increasing sea levels and reducing the availability of fresh water. At certain critical temperature thresholds, events will occur that push temperatures even higher, such as the release of methane sequestered in the frozen tundra or in semi-solid methane hydrates deep in the oceans.

People living in ecologically fragile regions (particularly in sub-Saharan Africa), areas already hampered by deforestation, overgrazing and overuse of underground aquifers, may find subsistence farming impossible if fresh water becomes scarce. The 10% of people who live within 10 metres of sea level will become vulnerable to increasingly common storms and floods. Subtropical regions that were free of mosquitoes may suddenly become malarious. Sachs fears that such calamities will provoke migration and conflict. In societies with excessive birth rates, a 'youth bulge' may outnumber adult authority figures, creating social instability. High birthrates also hinder economic

development, trapping families in poverty by absorbing any rise in productivity.

What can be done? Ever the optimist, Sachs believes we can pull back from the brink if we cooperate to reduce CO₂ emissions. He hopes for technology to sequester such emissions, but reiterates the widely discussed need for an end to deforestation, a switch to non-fossil fuels, more efficient power consumption, the use of electric hybrid vehicles and more energy-efficient buildings.

Sitting uneasily in this exploration of the ecological impact of the industrialized world is a discussion of what should be done to help the one-sixth of the world's population trapped in extreme poverty. Sachs argues that

they can escape the poverty trap only if agricultural yields and education improve, and if modern infrastructure, sanitation and health care are available. Sachs sees the UN Millennium Development Goals as a vital framework for reducing poverty. Ruefully, he reminds us that even this altruistic scheme has its enemies; for example, the US ambassador to the United Nations tried to expunge the concept from the agenda of the 2005 UN summit.

With great faith in international organizations, Sachs points to the control of chlorofluorocarbons, leaded petrol and acid rain as remarkable tributes to their value. For its breadth, the book is mysteriously silent on the role of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, institutions created to lift nations out of poverty, and which should hold the key to solving problems of development. The economics Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz, writing in his 2003 book *Globalization and its Discontents* (W. W. Norton), damned the IMF as having demonstrably damaged the poor of the developing world since the era of Reaganomics. Omission of this topic seems to reduce the value of *Common Wealth*.

Fatal Misconception describes a historic clash of opposed interest groups wrestling to impose their own population policies on the developing world. *Common Wealth* is an audacious first draft of a plan for sustainable development of the planet, in which population is one issue. If global institutions implement Sachs' plans, there will be winners and losers; we should be sure to ask who these organizations represent.

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"A global society must evolve to meet the ecological, demographic and economic challenges we face together."

In 1960s India, elephants were trained to distribute leaflets about birth control to villagers.